

Weapons and Warfare

History and Hardware of Warfare

1817-1860: KINGDOM OF THE TWO SICILIES I

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The general restoration of Europe's monarchies that followed Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo was confirmed by the Congress of Vienna (1815), and the exiled king of Sardinia was not forgotten. He recovered his lost lands, returned to Turin, and promptly attempted the restoration of the status quo ante. Yet post-Napoleonic Europe was very different from pre-revolutionary Europe. Many of the ideas spawned and exported by the French Revolution continued to circulate, posing a near-ubiquitous challenge to the natural conservatism of the restored monarchs. The ideas of 'the nation', endowed with a life of its own, and of the inborn right of its inhabitants to liberty, equality and social fraternity, were particularly strong, beginning to undermine the post-Napoleonic order as soon as it was established. Three parts of Europe where 'the nation' felt most excluded from politics were specially susceptible; and popular demands grew for the creation of nation-states on the French model. Poland, which had been carved up by three neighbouring empires, was to strive in vain throughout the nineteenth century to win back its independence; but Germany and Italy were to succeed where Poland failed. Germany was divided by the intense rivalry of Protestant Prussia and Catholic Austria; advocates of the German national movement, the Vormärz ('pre-March'), could at first see no easy way to do so. Italy's divisions were still more marked. The north was dominated by the Austrian Empire, which held onto both Venice and Milan; the centre was run by a gaggle of reactionary monarchs, including the Roman pontiff in his Papal States; and the south remained in the grip of the Bourbon Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. In face of the restored hereditary rulers, the advocates of the Italian national movement, the Risorgimento or 'Resurgence', did not possess a common strategy.

For Italian nationalism encompassed several competing interests. One wing placed the emphasis on cultural objectives, notably on education, the promotion of a single, standardized Italian language, and the promotion of national consciousness. The central figure in this was the Milanese writer, Alessandro Manzoni (1785–1873), author

of the first novel written in standard Italian, *I promessi sposi* (The Betrothed, 1827). Another wing was dedicated to political radicalism. Here the central role was played by the secret and revolutionary Society of the Coalburners, the Carbonari, whose activities were formally banned; one of its members, a Sicilian soldier called Guglielmo Pepe (1783– 1855), launched the first of many abortive risings in Calabria in 1820. There was even a tradition of support for the Risorgimento by ruling monarchs; Napoleon's stepson and viceroy in Italy, Eugène de Beauharnais, had set the example, which was followed by the emperor's brother-in-law, Joachim Murat, when King of Naples. It seemed to create the perceived need for a political patron of established authority, who could curb the hotheads while giving heart to the moderates and negotiating with the powers.

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The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was widely regarded, in Italy as in the rest of Europe, as a place of sloth and squalor, of grandeur and poverty, a place where landless labourers kept themselves just alive by scratching the parched soil of distant noblemen, where street urchins in the city picked the pockets of wealthy tourists and bands of brigands roamed with impunity in the hills outside, a land exploited and oppressed by an indolent monarchy, a frivolous aristocracy and a swarm of grasping clergy.

This picture was inherited and preserved by generations of historians until recently the stereotype was re-examined. Then it transpired that the kingdom was not just a land of latifondi, of vast desiccated estates in the interior that contained little except scrub for goats and some thin soil for wheat. Naples may not have had the irrigation or the natural advantages of Lombardy, but it was not an entirely backward place; wheat yields there were higher than in the Papal States. As for the latifondisti, it emerged that they were not all absentee landlords frittering away the produce of their workers by living in luxury in the capital. The latifondo was part feudal and part capitalist, part social structure and part business enterprise. Owners used their lands to feed themselves and the people who lived there, but they often grew food for foreign markets as well. The exported produce of the Barracco family, latifondisti from Calabria, included liquorice, olive oil, fine wool and cacciavallo cheese.

The state of industry in Naples has been similarly disparaged: travel accounts of the period leave the impression that the inhabitants had never heard of the spinning jenny or the steam engine. Yet a modernized textile industry, aided by a sensible tariff policy, existed in the Apennine foothills in the early nineteenth century; not much later, an engineering industry was established around the capital. Naples in fact enjoyed a number of industrial 'firsts'. It possessed the largest shipyards in Italy, it launched the first peninsular steamboat (1818) and it enjoyed the largest merchant marine in the Mediterranean; it also built the first iron suspension bridge in Italy, constructed the first Italian railway and was among the first Italian cities to use gas for street lighting. Admittedly, not all these achievements were as impressive as they sound. Naples may have built the first railway, but it was a short one, and its construction did not lead to a rapid expansion of the network. Most of the other states soon caught up and overtook

it: by 1860, when the whole of southern Italy had only 125 miles of track, Lombardy had 360 and Piedmont, after a slow start, possessed over 500.

A glance at its economic statistics reveals how separate Naples as a trading partner was from the rest of Italy. In 1855 85 per cent of its exports were sent to Britain, France and Austria, while only 3 per cent crossed the border into the Papal States; Neapolitan trade with Britain was three times greater than that with all the other Italian states added together. Feelings of separateness were not confined to commerce; Naples possessed its own remarkable legal system, widely regarded as superior to any other in the peninsula. Outsiders noticed that the place was different, a distinct, cosmopolitan entity, a kingdom (with or without Sicily) with an ancient history and borders which, almost uniquely in Italy, were not subjected to rearrangement after every war. Moreover, Naples itself was still by far the largest city in Italy – indeed the third-largest in Europe after London and Paris – and had been a capital since Charles of Anjou had established himself there 600 years earlier. It was the only Italian city, thought Stendhal, that had ‘the true makings of a capital’; the rest were ‘glorified provincial towns like Lyon’. Before 1860 hardly anyone contemplated the idea that the kingdom might be destroyed and its territory annexed by an all-Italian state; and little in the subsequent history of that state indicates that the Neapolitans would have been unhappier if they had been left to govern themselves.

In their propaganda Italian patriots of the nineteenth century identified the Neapolitan Bourbons as the chief home-grown tyrants and Austrian Habsburgs as their foreign equivalents. Yet even they were unable to convince themselves that the Grand Duchy of Tuscany was an oppressive state. It was governed by Ferdinand III, son of the great Peter Leopold and brother of the Austrian emperor whose armies had lost four wars against Napoleon and whose daughter had been sacrificed to the French emperor’s desire to beget an heir. Ferdinand’s return to Florence in 1814 did not lead to a persecution of bonapartists or to the abolition of reforms. As in the eighteenth century, Tuscany was a tolerant and civilized place that preferred Jews to Jesuits and welcomed exiles from Piedmont and from other states. Tariffs were low, censorship was feeble, and the armed forces were almost non-existent, though in an emergency the state could call for Austrian troops. Ferdinand was succeeded in 1824 by his son Leopold II, another benevolent ruler until the revolutions of 1848 converted him – along with Pope Pius IX and the King of Naples – to conservatism. In the early part of his reign he reduced taxes, carried out liberal reforms, encouraged science and returned to that perennially elusive project of Tuscan rulers, the draining of the Maremma marshlands on the Tyrrhenian coast.

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Weapons and Warfare

History and Hardware of Warfare

1817-1860: KINGDOM OF THE TWO SICILIES II

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*The **Army of the Two Sicilies** was the land forces of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, whose armed forces also included a navy. It was in existence from 1734 to 1861. It was also known as the Royal Army of His Majesty the King of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies (Reale esercito di Sua Maestà il Re del Regno delle Due Sicilie), the Bourbon Army (Esercito Borbonico) or the*

Neapolitan Army (Esercito Napoletano). Later many ex soldiers of this army joined Italian Royal Army.

SICILY AND NAPLES 1860

Garibaldi was diverted from the escapade in Nice by news of a revolt in Sicily and pressure from a number of patriotic colleagues who begged him to lead an expedition in its support. In early April a Mazzinian plot in Palermo, which was quickly suppressed, had touched off a wider rebellion in the interior: bands of hostile and impoverished peasants spread across the island, killing or ejecting policemen and tax collectors and eliminating all form of local government. Many educated Sicilians approved of the rebellion against the Bourbons but were nervous of the other aims of an essentially social uprising. A few of them wanted independence and a few others hoped for union with the rest of Italy; Francesco Crispi, a lawyer and a future Italian prime minister, opted for union partly because he considered his fellow islanders incapable of ruling themselves. Most Sicilians were autonomists, however, who would have been content with a revival of the 1812 constitution and the distant sovereignty of the Bourbons. Their dislike of Naples was more vivid than their desire to join Italy.

Garibaldi was delighted by the tidings from Sicily and enthusiastic about the idea of an expedition there. He was an idealistic man with a simplistic ideology. Italy must be free and united, and its enemies – principally the pope, the Bourbons and the Austrians – must be overthrown. Although originally a republican, he now realized that the national cause was only likely to succeed under the leadership of Victor Emanuel.

The Sicilian uprising seemed to be faltering in mid-April, when Bourbon forces regained control of the coastal regions. Garibaldi was disheartened by the news and vacillated over his impending expedition. He had criticized Mazzini for irresponsible adventures and he did not wish to emulate Carlo Pisacane, the socialist patriot whose followers had been annihilated after landing three years earlier on the Neapolitan coast. Another problem was munitions. Garibaldi's lieutenants had gone off to collect the money, arms and volunteers that were always available for any enterprise commanded by himself, but Azeglio, now the Governor of Milan, blocked a consignment of modern British rifles. 'We could declare war on Naples,' wrote the former prime minister, 'but not have a diplomatic representative there and send rifles to the Sicilians.'¹⁴

At the end of the month, after further dispiriting news from Sicily, Garibaldi called the expedition off, but two days later, apparently convinced by Crispi that the rebellion was still active, decided to go ahead after all. As soon as one of his lieutenants had seized two steamships in the harbour of Genoa, he dressed himself up in the outfit he had picked up in South America – red shirt, pale poncho and silk handkerchief – and set off with his 'Thousand' volunteers across the Tyrrhenian Sea, a voyage that propelled him and them into legend and into comparisons with the 'three hundred' soldiers of Leonidas, the Spartan king who had held the pass of Thermopylae against the Persian army in 480 BC. It was indeed an heroic enterprise but it was also, incontrovertibly, illegal. Apart from stealing the two ships, Garibaldi was making an unprovoked attack

on a recognized state with which his country, Piedmont-Sardinia, was not at war. History may have forgiven him for the deed, but it was an act of piracy all the same.

The Neapolitan king, Francesco II, did not at first take the expedition seriously. To him it seemed another adventure in the manner of Pisacane and the Bandiera brothers, a raid by a rabble of revolutionaries who would easily be defeated, despite the support of local rebels, by his troops on the island. Yet Garibaldi was a successful and charismatic guerrilla leader who enjoyed other advantages as well. King Ferdinand had died the previous year at Caserta after a reign of twenty-nine years, and his son, nicknamed Franceschiello, was young, timid and inexperienced. The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies had few allies except Austria, which was no longer in a position to help, and it had broken off diplomatic relations with Britain and France following their governments' denunciations of Ferdinand's 'despotism'. The current Napoleon was unsympathetic to the Bourbons because he wanted their throne for his cousin Murat, and the British disliked them because Gladstone had convinced his colleagues that they presided over a uniquely awful regime. The hostility of France and Britain was fatal to the Bourbons because those nations had the means to decide whether ships might or might not reach their destinations in the Mediterranean. Had they wished to do so, their navies could have prevented Garibaldi from landing in Sicily in May and from crossing to Calabria in August.

While the expedition enjoyed the support of the small number of southern patriots, it also had backing, equivocal and confusing though this often was, from inside the Piedmontese establishment. Even those who opposed it did so halfheartedly. Cavour tried to dissuade the Thousand from embarking but he did not threaten force to deter them. Later he dispatched the Piedmontese navy to intercept the stolen ships, to prevent reinforcements from reaching Sicily and to delay Garibaldi's crossing of the Straits of Messina. But the navy's failure to achieve any of these objectives was not entirely the fault of the commander, the inept Count of Persano. Without some degree of official connivance, it is difficult to see how steamships could have been seized in Piedmont's principal port, how the expedition could have managed to reach its destinations, and how so many soldiers 'on leave' from the Piedmontese army could have enlisted with the volunteers.

Garibaldi was lucky with his landing at Marsala on Sicily's west coast on 11 May. The Bourbon garrison had just marched off to Trapani, and Neapolitan ships protecting the town had just sailed off to the south; later, when one of these vessels returned, it delayed firing at the red-shirted volunteers who were in the process of disembarking for fear of hitting two British ships in the harbour. The garibaldini had expected a welcome from islanders pining for liberation and were thus surprised to find a complete absence of enthusiasm for their arrival; also disconcerting was the invisibility of the revolt they had come to support. A few days later, however, the Thousand defeated a badly led Neapolitan force at Calatafimi and attracted a small number of Sicilians to their ranks. After the battle Garibaldi marched eastwards, capturing Palermo in June and Milazzo in July, landing on the Calabrian mainland in August and reaching Naples in September, four months after he had set forth from the Ligurian coast. In Palermo, where he established a government with himself as interim dictator

and Crispi a secretary of state, he demonstrated his radical zeal by abolishing the grist tax and promising land reform for the peasants. Yet he could not go as far as he wished in this direction since he could not afford to alienate those landowners whose support was crucial for the achievement of political union with the north.

Although Garibaldi displayed courage and military skill in his campaign, the heroics were not quite on the scale that legend suggests. He did not defeat the 25,000 Neapolitan troops on the island with the thousand men he had arrived with at Marsala; over the summer, reinforcements from the north brought his own forces to more than 21,000. Nor was outrageous valour always required to overcome an enemy that, while well equipped, was poorly commanded and widely scattered. The young king was encumbered both with octogenarian ministers and with septuagenarian generals, one of whom had fought at Waterloo. These officers were not only old but also cowardly, incompetent and in some cases treacherous. At Calatafimi the Bourbon forces were positioned on a hilltop, inflicting casualties on the garibaldini attacking up the slope, when they were inexplicably ordered to retreat. One general foolishly suggested a truce which allowed Garibaldi to re-arm and take control of Palermo, another withdrew his troops unnecessarily from Catania to Messina, and officers from both the army and the navy deserted and took bribes. Some of these individuals were subsequently sent to the island of Ischia in the Bay of Naples, where the guilty ones were lightly demoted.

In Calabria Garibaldi found the opposition even feeble than in Sicily. Although the Neapolitan generals had 16,000 soldiers in the toe of Italy, they put up little resistance and sometimes submitted without firing a shot; one battalion surrendered to six wandering garibaldini who had got lost. Reggio was handed over with hardly a fight, and so was Cosenza. In Naples the minister for war announced in the mornings that he was departing for Calabria to defeat Garibaldi but then changed his mind in the afternoons because he considered his presence in the capital was essential to prevent disorder. Well did he and the other generals deserve a dismissive line in Richard Strauss's opera, *Der Rosenkavalier*: when the Marschallin thinks she is about to be surprised with her lover, she decides to confront her husband, the field marshal: 'Ich bin kein napolitanischer General: wo ich steh' steh' ich.' ('I am not a Neapolitan general: where I stand I stand.')

On 7 September Garibaldi entered Naples by train, in advance of his army, where he was welcomed by Bourbon officials: the minister of police had already sycophantically told him that the city was waiting 'with the greatest impatience ... to greet the redeemer of Italy and to place in his hands the power and destiny of the state'. King Francesco had left the city the previous day, intending to carry on the war from Gaeta, the coastal fortress town near the border with the Papal States in the north. For all his limitations, he was a conscientious and honourable monarch who realized that a siege of Italy's largest and most densely populated city would cause terrible carnage. But he did not shirk or run away like the dukes of central Italy had done a year before. He left garrisons in the castles of Naples and marched out, leaving nearly all his money and his personal possessions in his capital. He expected to return.

In the north of the kingdom the Bourbon army was transformed. Loyal regiments from Naples and other provinces of the mainland fought valiantly and were victorious in several skirmishes against the redshirts near Capua. Yet once again the generalship was defective, too slow, too cautious, too lacking in imagination. An urgent and vigorous counter-attack might have defeated the smaller enemy force; but when the advance eventually came, Garibaldi halted it on the River Volturno, a dogged defensive action in which he lost more men than his opponents. Even then the Neapolitans might have remained undefeated if the contest had been limited to themselves and the volunteers.

As soon as Cavour realized that Garibaldi would conquer Sicily, he was eager to annex the island to Piedmont. He had always detested home-grown revolutionaries more than he disliked Bourbons and Austrians, and the last thing he wanted was to see Sicily and possibly Naples in the hands of democrats and other radicals. Once the redshirts had reached Palermo, he therefore sent his representative, La Farina, who arrived in early June with posters proclaiming 'We want annexation'. It was a strange appointment because La Farina was an insensitive individual and a well-known antagonist of both Garibaldi and Crispi. So much of his time in Sicily was spent intriguing and causing friction among members of the new government that after a month Garibaldi had him arrested and sent back north.

In Naples Cavour chose to employ a tactic similar to that which La Farina had failed with the previous year in the Po Valley: arranging a 'spontaneous' uprising in the city – and doing so before Garibaldi arrived. He duly sent Persano to the Bay of Naples with money in his pockets to bribe officials, and soldiers hidden on his ships ready to rush to the aid of the conspirators on land. In the city the Piedmontese ambassador duly gave the signal for revolt but, as so often with these Cavourian schemes, nothing happened. The Neapolitans were sensibly waiting to see which side was likely to win before committing themselves to the conflict.

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Few Europeans mourned the fall of the Bourbons. Nor did later Neapolitans greatly regret the passing of a dynasty that had provided them with five kings over a century and a quarter – longer than the rule of either the Tudors or the Stuarts in England. Sentimental attachment was subdued perhaps by distant memories of earlier dynasties and by the presence of so many monuments of previous ages. The family had indeed produced no outstanding monarch but nor – despite what propaganda said – had it supplied a very bad one. In any case, was the general standard any lower than those of their cousins in Spain, the Savoia in Piedmont or the Hanoverians in Great Britain? The victors and their international supporters claimed that the Bourbon exit was an inevitable episode on the road to Italian unity, a necessary consequence of a war of liberation, the conflict having been simply a logical stage in the process of nation-building, a way of absorbing natural national territory – as Wessex had ingested Mercia or France had taken in Provence. Few people outside the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies saw it for what it ultimately was, a war of expansion conducted by one Italian state against another. The unusual feature of the contest was that it was a three-sided one,

two sides playing the recognized parts of protagonist (the garibaldini) and antagonist (the Bourbons) while the third (the Piedmontese) took on a more subtle role, pretending to be a friend of the others but in reality being the enemy (and eventual conqueror) of both.

Moral and historical justifications for the conquest of Naples are perplexing. According to G. M. Trevelyan, the doyen of British eulogists of the Risorgimento, unification was necessary because of 'the utter failure of the Neapolitans to maintain their own freedom when left to themselves in 1848'. Yet other people have failed in similar fashion without needing or deserving conquest. Another argument, still favoured by certain Neapolitan historians, is that the rapid collapse of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in 1860 proved that it was rotten and required elimination. Again, other regimes have collapsed before a sudden onslaught only to be resuscitated later by their allies. A distinguished historian of Naples, an elderly man whose great-grandparents were all Neapolitans, insists that his country could not have become a modern nation by itself after 1860, that it needed the partnership of Piedmont to give it the apparatus of a modern state. His argument does not convince. Piedmont was undoubtedly a richer and more liberal state than the Two Sicilies in 1860, but for most of the eighteenth century Naples had possessed a more enlightened regime than Turin, and only a generation before union it had had more industry and more progressive codes of law. The belief that Naples, unlike other countries in western Europe, was incapable of evolving by itself is simply illogical, an example of that southern inferiority complex which was engendered by the triumphalism of the Risorgimento and reinforced by much subsequent talk, northern and condescending, about 'the southern question' and 'the problem of the mezzogiorno'.

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